

CONNECTING FEAR, LEADERSHIP, AND CHARISMA

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This literature review explores effective leadership in the face of fear on the part of the leader as well as followers. Psychology literature is used to define fear and coping methods, followed by a discussion of the concept of crisis leadership. This points to some interesting connections to the concept of charismatic leadership.

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Introduction

In a time of violence and crime, both here and abroad, our people, businesses, organizations, and government are all feeling the effects of fear. People are afraid of crime, afraid of another 9-11, afraid of losing their jobs, their spouse, their children. Businesses are afraid of unethical leaders, going bankrupt, takeovers, and having to fire people. So what is effective leadership in an environment of crisis? This study attempts to pull together related literature from several disciplines to answer this question.

Purpose and Objectives

The purpose of this study was to conduct a thorough review of literature related to fear and leadership. The objectives were as follows:

1. Define key terms
2. Describe coping strategies for dealing with fear
3. Summarize the literature related to crisis leadership
4. Compare coping strategies for dealing with fear with crisis leadership concepts

Procedures

Data for this study was gathered through a library search at Oklahoma State University. Searches were conducted through databases including Proquest, ERIC, Academic Search Elite, Humanities Abstracts, PsycARTICLES, and PsycINFO. Search terms included “fear,” “crisis,” “leadership” and “coping,” as well as various combinations of these terms. The databases were accessed online, and articles were collected both online and through the library print resources. An internet search was also conducted with the same search terms.

Findings

Definitions

The key terms for this research include fear, crisis, leadership, and charisma. For ease of use and common understanding, terms were defined using Merriam-Webster's dictionary, both online and in print.

Fear is defined as "an unpleasant often strong emotion caused by anticipation or awareness of danger." Synonyms include alarm, dismay, dread, fright, horror, panic, terror, and trepidation.

Interestingly, the first definition of crisis in the dictionary is "the turning point for better or worse in an acute disease or fever." For the purposes of this study the third definition will be used: "an unstable or crucial time or state of affairs in which a decisive change is impending; especially one with a distinct possibility of a highly undesirable outcome." Synonyms for crisis include juncture, contingency, emergency, turning point, dilemma, puzzle, quandary, and predicament.

Leadership is defined by Merriam-Webster's as "1. The office or position of a leader; 2. Capacity to lead; 3. The act or an instance of leading." To gain a more complete understanding, we look to the definition of lead, "1. To direct, as by going before or along with; guide; 2. To direct by influence." Synonyms for leadership include authority, control, effectiveness, foresight, and influence.

This study eventually took a turn toward charismatic leadership, and therefore a definition of charisma will be helpful before moving on. The second definition of charisma in the dictionary is "a personal magic of leadership arousing special popular loyalty or enthusiasm for a public figure." Charm, allure, appeal, fascination, and magnetism are all synonyms for charisma.

Coping With Fear

Mikulincer and Florian (1995) help us define coping as it relates to fear. They describe coping responses to fear as consisting of “cognitions and behaviors that a person uses to reduce stress and to moderate its emotional impact.” They group these responses into two types, problem-focused and emotion-focused. Problem-focused coping responses are directed at solving the cause of stress. Emotion-focused coping responses attempt to ease internal tension through rationalization, distancing, and wishful thinking. They state that the general consensus in the literature is that problem-focused coping strategies tend to have a positive impact on the individual’s emotional outcomes, while emotion-focused strategies tend to have a negative impact.

Much of the research related to coping with fear focuses on fear of crime. Reid, Roberts and Hilliard (1998) studied a sample in New Orleans, Louisiana in an attempt to determine if people cope with their fear individually or collectively. They categorized fear as emotion-based: “the individual can visualize her/himself as a victim of a specific crime;” and risk-based: “the individual evaluates her/his risk of victimization in certain situations.” Coping strategies differ depending on the type of fear exhibited, as well as individual factors (Reid, Roberts, & Hilliard, 1998).

Fear motivates many people to take precautionary measures, although prevention techniques often actually increase fear of crime (Liska, Sanchirico, & Reed, 1988; Reid, Roberts, & Hilliard, 1998). These precautions tend to serve as reminders of the risk of victimization, therefore increasing fear. These precautionary measures, then, do not reduce fear but rather serve as a buffer, allowing the individual to live with the fear (Rosenbaum, 1986).

Schoenberger (1999) agrees that fear motivates people “to take the actions necessary to avoid or escape from danger.” He states, however, that the danger of the situation is seldom related to the amount of fear and anxiety experienced. Anxiety expectancy, then, is the trigger for fear. Anxiety expectancy can be defined as “a belief about the occurrence of anxiety” (Schoenberger, 1999). It is purely internal, but this perception of personal threat is the single variable most likely to cause fear. Schoenberger (1999) goes on to suggest that the best way to cope with fear is to decrease the anticipation of fear. This can be done through a variety of therapeutic techniques, including systematic desensitization, in vivo exposure, and cognitive restructuring.

Crisis Leadership

It is crucial for leaders to have a well thought-out strategic plan in times of crisis and instability (Weiss, 2002). “We call for someone with answers, decision, strength, and a map of the future, someone who knows where we ought to be going – in short, someone who can make hard problems seem simple” (Heifetz, 1994). But what does effective leadership in a crisis actually mean?

Very little actual research exists examining what is effective leadership in a crisis. However, the business literature is full of suggestions, possible models, and anecdotal evidence. The simplest of these is presented by Anderson (2002). His three key tenets of crisis leadership are: “1) Stay engaged and lead from the front; 2) Point to the big picture and communicate the vision; 3) Seek wise counsel and use your team.” Weiss (2002) also presents some keys to crisis leadership. Hers include: “1) Maintain absolute integrity; 2) Know your stuff; 3) Declare your expectations; 4) Show uncommon commitment; 5) Expect positive results; 6) Take care of your people; 7) Put duty before self; and 8) Get out in front.”

Mitroff (2001) focuses his model for effective crisis leadership more on a specific crisis, but the themes are the same. One of his biggest points is “first respond primarily to the emotional needs of the public with care and concern.” He urges leaders to do all they can to prevent crisis, and to consider crisis leadership an ongoing effort, part of the strategic planning efforts of the organization. Samuelson (1990), on the other hand, argues that this concept is nice, but many crises are unavoidable: “Crisis governance, though often not the best way of handling our affairs, is often the only way. We are now writing our future history. The right question to ask is not why we have crises but whether our leadership is good enough to handle the ones that we must inevitably confront.”

Anecdotal evidence of effective crisis leadership can be found in studying the presidency of George W. Bush. After September 11, 2001, Bush’s approval ratings jumped 35 points, and maintained this “rally boost” for a record-breaking eighteen months (Gregg, 2003). The president’s post-attack leadership can be broken down into four key elements (Gregg, 2003). First, the president projected reassurance. He made sure he was visible, calm, and in charge, bolstering the public’s view of their leader and giving them confidence that everything would be right again. Second, Bush reflected the public mind. The people were full of anger and sadness, and Bush let them know he was feeling the same thing. Third, the president instructed the public mind. He took the opportunity to educate the American people on who the enemy was, who the enemy was not, and how this war would be fought. Finally, Bush ministered to the nation’s wounds. He shared his religious faith openly in the days and months following September 11, and made it his business to be there with families, friends, and public servants as they put life back together (Gregg, 2003).

Charismatic Leadership

The link between fear, crisis, and leadership in the literature focuses around charismatic leadership. Much of the business literature cited above describes components of charismatic leadership, but without relating it directly to the theory. There is also a strong link between crisis and charismatic leadership through research, which will be explored below. First, it is important to define the concept of charismatic leadership.

One definition of charisma is “an inspired and divine gift.” The synonyms at the beginning of this paper point out the fact that charisma is often seen as something not quite comprehensible. Words such as “personal magic,” “allure,” and “mystical” are sometimes used to describe charisma. The leadership theory, then, is based on a leader’s ability to inspire followers, and capture their imagination (Nahavandi, 2003).

Charismatic leaders have a strong conviction about their ideas, and high self-confidence. They tend to have high energy and enthusiasm levels, and are expressive. They have excellent communication skills, and are good at building images their followers can experience and understand (Nahavandi, 2003). Examples of charismatic leaders include Martin Luther King, Bill Clinton, Adolf Hitler, and Gandhi. Their followers tend to have a strong affection for the leader, and great respect, loyalty and devotion. Followers also have high performance expectations for their charismatic leaders (Nahavandi, 2003).

Charismatic leadership has to do with more than just a leader and followers, however. It is most likely to occur in a specific environment, particularly one that has a sense of imminent crisis. Other elements related to the occurrence of charismatic leadership include a perceived need for change, an opportunity to articulate ideological goals, and the availability of dramatic symbols (Nehavandi, 2003).

Finally, it is important to note that, in the leadership literature, charismatic leadership is often used interchangeably with the term transformational leadership. Transformational leadership is actually a broader term that encompasses charisma as one of its key elements (Nehavandi, 2003).

Crisis and Charismatic Leadership

Much of the literature related to charismatic leadership links it to crisis, primarily from the perspective that crisis is the environment that allows for the emergence of charismatic leadership (Pillai & Meindl, 1998). Little research has been conducted, however, to demonstrate this link. The basic concept can be summarized as follows: "People in crisis seek proxy control. They find it in their "savior," i.e., the leader to whom they attribute extraordinary abilities. Crises provide leaders with opportunities to take bold purposeful action, which is then interpreted by followers in charismatic terms and may increase their willingness to follow" (Pillai & Meindl, 1998).

Charismatic leadership can also be seen as a coping mechanism for followers faced with a crisis (or fear). The follower turns to a leader, who helps the follower improve performance and reduce anxiety anticipation, thus instilling loyalty and respect for the leader (Pillai & Meindl, 1998). The downside to this is if the crisis and ensuing stress persist, the leader may be evaluated poorly and attributions of charismatic leadership are likely to fade. In essence for a charismatic leader to maintain that attribute they must routinely solve crisis situations to the satisfaction of their followers (Pillai & Meindl, 1998).

A few research articles exist that attempt to link crisis and charismatic leadership empirically. Pillai and Meindl (1998) did a comprehensive survey including many elements, two of which were crisis and charismatic leadership. They found that crisis had a negative

relationship with charismatic leadership in their survey, which asked followers to reflect back on a crisis and evaluate their leaders. Basically the more current stress and crisis a follower felt the lower their rating of their leader's charisma was. Pillai and Meindl (1998) did not see this as inconsistent with the possibility that crisis allowed for the emergence of charismatic leadership, but concluded that the persistence of the crisis would create dissatisfaction among followers who would therefore not rate their leaders as charismatic.

In a laboratory study Pillai (1996) had similar results. He simulated a crisis with a group of undergraduate students, and found that group members were more likely to base their evaluations of leader effectiveness on charismatic appeal in crisis situations than they were in noncrisis situations. He concluded that crises foster the emergence of charismatic leaders who are then perceived to be more effective than leaders who emerge in non-crisis situations.

Finally, House and Spangler (1991) studied 31 presidents in their first term of office. They argue that crises may present the president with an opportunity to take charismatic action and may lead subordinates to accept or demand charismatic action from the president. They define charisma as a relationship and not a personality characteristic. With this definition, charisma exists only if followers see the leader this way. Their extensive, historical study concluded that crises were significantly and positively related to behavioral charisma and to presidential performance.

“The attribution of charisma depends on the simultaneous interaction of the situation context (i.e., crisis), the characteristics of the followers (i.e., norms, values, culture), and the qualities exhibited by the leader. The charismatic bond may ultimately represent a manifestation of the need of followers during times of crisis for centralized authority” (Valle, 1999).

Conclusions

Fear is obviously a major component of our environment personally, professionally, and as a nation right now. If leaders intend to be effective, they will need to deal directly with this fear and help followers cope. The literature on coping with fear gives us a few clues as to how to deal with this. First and foremost, reducing anxiety expectancy through precautions and cognitive restructuring can be effective leadership techniques. John Engels states: “The most influential variable in regulating the anxiety of any work group is the presence of a clear-thinking leader. Leadership regulates the anxiety of any group – the family, a company, the nation” (Weiss, 2002).

The literature on crisis leadership gives us a few more clues. We should focus on strategic planning, caring for people first, leading from the front, and showing uncommon commitment. These concepts are also directly applicable to charismatic leadership. Good charismatic leaders bolster commitment in their followers through sharing a vision from the frontlines, making followers feel important and cared for, and being committed to their own vision and the organization. So, charismatic leadership emerges through crisis, and is also the most effective way to move through a crisis to the other side.

Implications and Recommendations

This literature review attempts to establish a link between fear, crisis, and charismatic leadership. Right now this link is tenuous at best, and requires further research to figure out exactly how the three fit together. To that end, future research needs to explore the relationship between crisis and charismatic leadership further, particularly how they each create the other. Research also needs to identify more specifically the skills of charismatic leadership and how leaders can incorporate these skills into their repertoire. Finally, some future research should

focus more specifically on fear and leadership. How fear creates crisis would help link the topics, but specifically how followers who are fearful evaluate leadership differently would be interesting and helpful in the current times.

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